

Learner-Centeredness and EFL Instruction in Vietnam: A Case Study¹

Hung Van Dang

University of South Australia hung.dang@postgrads.unisa.edu.au

Although learner-centeredness has been widely applied in instruction in the world, this approach has only been cautiously adopted in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching at some institutions in Vietnam. Taking a social constructivist view, this case study explores how a learner-centred perspective is employed in EFL teaching at a teacher training college in Vietnam. The study is based on data generated with EFL teachers and students of an advanced level class through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, group discussions and document reviews. The data have been qualitatively analysed to show how learner-centeredness is successfully employed to get the students actively involved in learning. Implications are drawn in regard to EFL teaching and learning, and also curriculum and materials development.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learner-centeredness, social constructivist view, learner involvement and activity, willingness

INTRODUCTION

In line with the rapid socio-economic development in recent years, education in Vietnam has undergone major changes in terms of curriculum and learning materials as well as way of teaching and learning. In the new government proposals for educational development, a learner-centred way of teaching and learning is identified as central, and the involved learner is seen as a key component within it. In this paper a case is presented in which a learner-centred approach is successfully applied to enhance learners' active participation in language learning

This paper addresses two issues:

- a) How learner-centeredness works to enhance learners' involvement and active participation in learning in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning in Vietnam; and
- b) What contributes to the learners' success in the classroom?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Theoretical Framework

Williams and Burden (1997) proposed that the quality of classroom learning could be analysed from a social constructivist perspective in terms of four key elements in the teaching and learning process: **teachers, learners, tasks and contexts**. This model is illustrated in Figure 1. This form

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of learning has been adopted and adapted here in order to analyse the educational outcomes in an advanced or 'high quality (HQ)' class. In the process of teaching and learning, the interaction between teacher, task and learner happens in a **context** which includes the physical environment, the emotional environment, the whole school ethos, the wider social environment, the political environment and the cultural setting. This can be represented as a set of concentric circles that influence each other, with the participants playing an ongoing part in shaping (and also being shaped by) the environments noted. The **teacher** views the task in the light of the institutional beliefs and decisions, and selects classroom tasks which reflect these beliefs about teaching and learning. Based on their beliefs, teachers choose the approaches, methodology and strategies for teaching which are, in their view, most effective and suitable for their students.

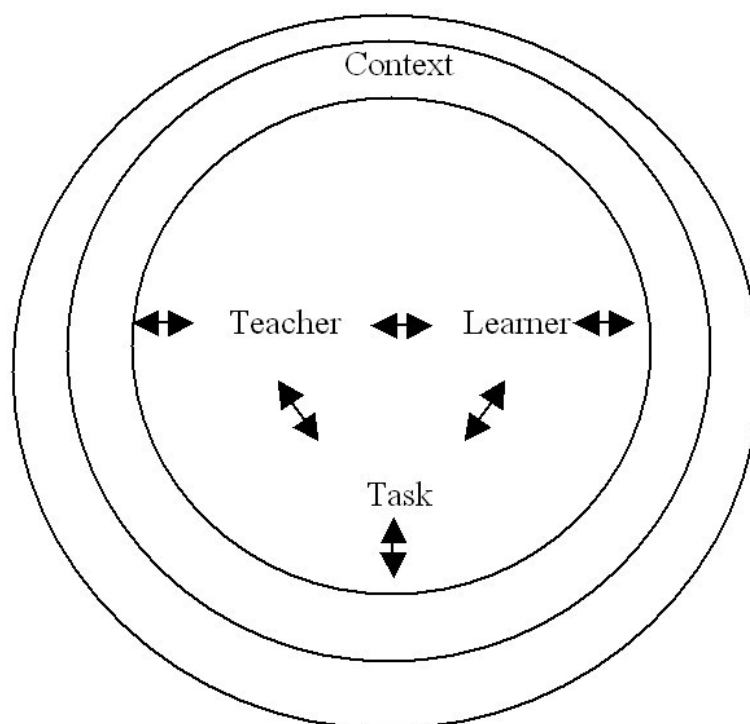


Figure 1. A social constructivist model of the teaching – learning process
(Source: Williams and Burden, 1997)

Learners interpret tasks in ways that are meaningful and personal to them as individuals. The ways the learners interpret the tasks are greatly influenced by their beliefs about language learning, learning strategies, learning styles and personal characteristics like motivation and interest. In this process, the **task** is the interface between the teacher and learners. The task in its broader sense includes the curriculum, learning materials and learning activities as well as assessment and examinations. Teachers and learners also interact with each other. These three elements: teacher, task and learner form a continuum that is in dynamic equilibrium.

Data Collection

This study investigates English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) and teachers' and students' ideas about language learners. The data used in this paper were drawn from document reviews, a classroom observation, an in-depth interview with a teacher and a group discussion with six students of a *Chat luong cao* (high quality) class at one of the universities investigated. The students of this high quality (HQ) class were specifically selected for this investigation by the president of the university and other university staff as examples of successful EFL learners who were actively involved in the learning process. This study was undertaken at the beginning of the

students’ third year. It was part of a special class of EFL undergraduate students that were part of a pilot project intended to trial a model for training EFL students who wished "to reach the advanced level of English proficiency (Certificate of Advanced English University of Cambridge) on graduation" (Nhom Giao Vien, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Classroom Observation

When given the chance to observe a lesson conducted in the HQ class labelled '*Lop Cu Nhan Chat Luong cao Khoa 35*' (High-quality Bachelor Class - 35th Year), it was a surprising to find that all the students were such confident and involved in learners. What was seen and heard indicated that a true learner-centred approach was in operation.

The lesson that was observed was the first one of a writing course. In this lesson the students were required to work in groups of five to review the writing program from the previous year and to make suggestions for the program for the coming year. Each group, working in one corner of the room with other students sitting in a circle, was provided with several large sheets of paper and coloured markers. One student was appointed as a secretary and took notes on the discussion and then wrote these notes on sheets of paper for presentation. The sheet of paper was divided into two columns. In the left column were ideas and comments on the previous year's writing program, while suggestions for the coming year's program were in the right column. Different figures or faces were included to show students' attitudes such as disappointment or happiness (See Table1).

All members in each group were eager to contribute their opinions in English. It was, therefore, rather noisy during the group discussion. While the students were engaged in the task, the teacher was sitting at her desk reading her tentative plan for the year and at times answering some questions raised by certain students from the four groups. For example,

Student (S): Excuse me, Teacher. Should we also talk about assignments or only genres and topics for writing?

Table 1. An example of the students' presentation sheet

PORTFOLIO		ACADEMIC WRITING	
LAST YEAR	(Happy Face) Improvement	THIS YEAR	-writing research reviews
	-habit of writing		-practising critical thinking and writing
	-understanding of different genres		-getting familiar with thesis paper
	(Sad Face)		
	-more guide and revision from teacher		
BULLETIN	-more interesting topics		
	-renovation needed		

After the group discussion, the students moved their chairs to form one group for presentation, with all students facing the blackboard. They were sitting in a very relaxed and comfortable way with some students folding their legs on the seats (this would never happen in a mainstream class where students were expected to be very disciplined). Two students from each group in turn went to the front of the class, either holding their sheet or sticking it onto the board. They had five minutes to present their ideas. After the presentation, the students had to leave the sheet either on the board or on the walls so that members of other groups could refer to if they had any comments or questions.

After the four groups had finished their presentations a class discussion started. The students began with comments on the previous year's program. They discussed comments made by different groups, and then ranked the comments and ideas according to the usefulness and

relevance of the content or skills covered in the program. Similar procedures were applied to the discussion of the coming year's program. The following statements are representative of the students' opinions:

Student 1: We lacked knowledge, I mean background knowledge, and we were not confident about our writing.

Student 2: Teachers should analyse the sample writings to show us their characteristics.

Student 3: What I want is free writing. We should focus on expressing our ideas rather than being too alert to grammar mistakes.

Student 4: You should give us more samples of writing.

While the students were speaking, the teacher stood near her desk listening to them and taking notes. After the two lists of comments and suggestions were made, the teacher started to speak. First, she praised the students for their critical and thoughtful ideas, their eagerness to discuss and their straightforwardness, she said, "Thank you for your critical and thoughtful ideas. I'm very pleased to see that you are so eager, confident and straightforward." She then responded to the comments on the previous year's program, explaining some points that the students might have misunderstood or that could not be done differently due to external constraints such as inadequate resources and facilities. The teacher then turned to the coming year's program. She began by discussing with the students which topics, skills, and strategies would be included in the program and which ones she was planning to delete. She then negotiated with the students how the tasks should be done and in what way assessment would be carried out. The lesson ended with an agreement on the desired program for the writing subject for the whole school year.

The students' fluency in presenting and discussing their ideas, and their accurate pronunciation was very impressive as was the way they got involved in the learning task and the classroom climate in which every student confidently and actively contributed to the lesson in a friendly, cooperative and open manner.

After the lesson, the teacher took part in an interview that lasted about 40 minutes; six students also volunteered to join a focus-group discussion which took place following the interview with the teacher. The interview and the discussion focused on the topics related to the teacher's and students' perspectives as active language learners, factors which might support (or hinder) the development and enhancement of students' active participation in learning activities, and their experiences as involved language learners.

Factors Affecting the Students Active Involvement in Learning

The context

The teaching and learning of the HQ Class was positively influenced by the context at different levels. At the national level, in response to the government requirements to develop the human resources for national development, different policies had been issued that were directed at expanding the scope as well as improving the quality of education. These policies have had a profound influence upon educational innovation at different levels of the Vietnamese education system, and this class was not an exception. In addition, the active involvement of the Vietnamese people in every aspect of life in the current situation of socio-economic development also affected students in general and students of this class in particular. Examples of students' taking part in different activities in society such as EFL tutoring, working as volunteers at cultural and social events, and being tourist guides indicated that the students not only knew how to make full use of available opportunities but also how to create favourable conditions to develop their learning. Through these activities they could apply what had been learned at university to improve their

English proficiency, to gain more experience, and develop communication and as well as other life skills.

At the institutional level, the university's vision and commitment to improve the teaching and learning environment were appreciated by the staff and students. The university's policies and its wish to implement changes in the way of teaching and learning had a major influence on the quality of learning in the HQ class. Complying with the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)² policies on renovation in teaching methodology, the university identified learner-centeredness as the preferred approach because "the traditional model with the teacher governing all class room activities, this (learner-centred) approach enabled students to participate in a more active way" (Nhom Giao Vien, 2002, p.26). The HQ class came into existence as a result of these policies. The class was taught exclusively by four qualified and experienced teachers who were selected by the EFL Department discipline with the approval of the university. The four teachers who had obtained overseas master degrees in English language teaching were totally committed to the project. The provision of subjects and time allotment for each subject³ were not different from those of the mainstream. However, the syllabus and learning materials for this class were more flexible and more learner-centred compared with those in the mainstream classes. The teachers were permitted to design a syllabus and develop learning materials that were relevant to the learners' ability, interests and needs. Accordingly, the students were allowed to negotiate the content and the mode of study with their teachers. In this way, the teachers and students of this class were encouraged and provided with the best possible conditions to trial this new model.

At the classroom level, the class structure, the physical environment of the classroom, and particularly, the classroom culture had a direct and significant impact on constructing and developing involvement in the learners. This class was different from the mainstream ones in a number of ways. First, there were only 20 students (1 male, 19 females, aged between 20 – 21 years) who were competitively selected through the results of the university entrance examination, an IQ test and an English proficiency test. Unlike students in the mainstream who may stay together throughout their university careers (Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996), the students of this class would have been "kicked out" (Teacher interview) if they did not achieve final average scores for all subjects in an academic year of 80 per cent or better. It was, therefore, very competitive to survive in this class. Second, this class had a room that was especially equipped with an air-conditioner, a ceiling fan, a desk for the teacher, a cabinet to store teaching aids and materials, movable chairs, a portable radio cassette, a 21-inch television set with cable and satellite channels, a VCR, a computer, an overhead projector, a screen, and an LCD projector. On the walls there were colourful English posters that had been produced by the students. It can be said that the relatively small class size, and the classroom, with its comfortable furniture and technologically advanced equipment, were optimal conditions for EFL teaching and learning.

Finally, According to Breen (1985), in order to analyse the learning that goes on in the classroom it is helpful to view the classroom as a culture. Holliday (1994) has characterized classroom culture as an interrelated and complex mix of student culture, host institution culture, international education-related culture, professional-academic culture, and national culture. Kramsch and Sullivan (1996, p.202) have considered these characteristics in describing the classroom in Vietnam as having an atmosphere similar to a 'family'.

In Vietnam..., the host institution assigns students to class groups that stay together throughout their university careers. The whole class, therefore, is one 'group' composed

² MOET: Ministry of Education and Training

³ For example, time allotment for the English proficiency subjects (listening, speaking, reading and writing) was 300 periods/30 weeks (1 period = 45 minutes).

of students who come to know each other very well. The international education-related culture affects classroom practices through educators from Australia or the UK who train teachers in 'communicative methodology'. The professional-academic culture prescribes highly differentiated roles for teachers and students in ways that reflect traditional Confucian precepts. And the national culture enhances classroom culture through a rich oral literary tradition that is still alive in Vietnam. Classroom discourse reflects these interrelated and overlapping cultures.

Being treated as a family, the ambience in the HQ class was construed as an open and non-threatening in which, a good rapport between teachers and students and among students themselves was established, and respect for one another's ideas was encouraged. This climate also encouraged participants to be risk-takers. "Right on the first day of the program the students were encouraged to establish a positive attitude (towards mistakes): not being afraid to speak" (Teacher interview). In addition, this open and non-threatening classroom environment "allowed teachers and students to share the ownership of knowing" (Sorensen, 1996, p.88). The students were allowed and encouraged to make decisions, reflect on and evaluate experiences, and think critically. Most answers did not come from the teachers or texts, but from the students themselves. In this sense, knowledge was actively pursued (Sorensen, 1996, p.88).

On this basis a democratic and cooperative environment was built up and the students also developed a spirit of assistance and cooperation in their class through various learning activities within and outside the classroom such as publishing bulletins, organizing mini-conferences, establishing and maintaining the speaking of English in the class at all times. A student remarked. "We often work in teams to exchange our learning experiences. Sometimes we ask team members to gather information for a topic to be presented or for a project." (Student group discussion)

In addition, unlike students in other classes, the students of the HQ Class were learning in a constructive atmosphere where members were supported by the teachers to build a critical yet united community.

As teachers, right at the beginning of the program we tried to help them make constructive remarks (about their peers). For example, we suggested the students make comments on their friends' strengths, and on what their friends had achieved instead of finding out what mistakes had been made. Every idea was welcome. (Teacher interview)

As Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 82) pointed out, learning a language is "not just a mental process" but "a process of negotiation between individuals and society." The pragmatic and organisational conditions described were both favourable for and conducive to effective learning in which the learners were actively involved in learning activities.

The task

Learning tasks are representations of educational goals and objectives which are outlined in the curriculum. Therefore, in discussing the tasks as an affecting factor, the task is analysed more broadly than in Williams and Burden (1997), who take it to mean the learning program as a whole, the curriculum and syllabus, learning materials, learning activities, and assessment. The HQ class has enjoyed much more freedom in covering the learning content relevant to the learners' needs and interest, which is different from the curriculum of other mainstream classes, which is totally prescribed. The teachers and the students appeared to be happy with the curriculum.

I feel more comfortable teaching this class because we are permitted to make our own decisions on the syllabus and teaching materials. It is quite flexible, but not strictly

compliant to what is prescribed by the MOET and the university and what most of other classes are doing. (Teacher interview)

The following statements are an excerpt from the discussion with the students and demonstrate that the students played a key role in choosing materials to learn.

Researcher: What do you think about your curriculum?

Student 1: The syllabus for English proficiency is OK. But the ones for other common subjects are still very arbitrary. And for the English proficiency syllabus, many changes have been made in speaking and writing skills.

Researcher: Are your learning materials up-to-date?

Student 2: Yes, they are. In general, our teachers try to up-date their teaching materials.

Researcher: Are the content relevant to your needs and interests?

Student 3: We can recommend topics and themes which we feel necessary for us. It means instead of forcing us to accept the prescribed curriculum, our teachers teach us on the basis of our recommendation.

In addition to the materials provided by their teachers, the students were encouraged and instructed to explore materials from different sources available such as the internet, the university library, and the Department's mini library. The teachers also downloaded programs or materials from the internet and stored them on the computer in the classroom for the students who were unable to get access to the internet to use.

With respect to classroom tasks, the students were assigned and familiarized with different activities to do in the classroom or to carry out after class. Although activities varied according to the language skill subjects (listening, speaking, reading and writing), working in pairs and small groups were prioritised so as to make the classroom atmosphere more open and more conducive to meaningful learning. According to the teacher, the students would be more involved when working in groups, and she made sure they did not always work in the same groups, instead encouraged them to join different groups to meet new partners. She explained,

It is beneficial for the students because when they go to work in the future they will be able to join any group. Besides, working in this way may motivate students, as it may be boring to work with the same people for most of the time. When in a new group with new partners they may be more inspired and more creative. (Teacher interview)

Through these activities the students could at the same time improve their knowledge and skills in the target language and could develop their learning skills, enhance their involvement and build positive attitude and a cooperative spirit for working in teams or working individually. These activities were highly valued by the teachers:

For example, in the last semester, the students were assigned to make a wall newspaper with the contents approved by the teachers. However, the topics were very broad, for this was the first time. In addition, the students were requested to prepare a mini-conference. The students were divided into six groups with three to four students each. Each group had to present a pre-selected topic from among the topics assigned to the first year students and speak for 15 minutes. In fact, the students were very creative in the preparation and presentation and they utilised their ability in a very accurate way. (Nhom Giao Vien, 2002, p. 29)

Referring to assessment, evaluation of students was carried out in an on-going basis.

The portfolio is part of the on-going assessment. In addition, there is a mid-term test and a written assignment. Each semester students are required to do an assignment worth 30 per cent, 10 per cent for the mid term test, and 60 per cent for the final exam. (Teacher interview)

The students said that they were happy with the way they were assessed. They said that the assessment could help them identify what level of English proficiency they had reached, and could also help them to learn from their mistakes, "After marking we also give them explanations in our feedback" (Teacher interview).

Although the whole curriculum, the materials, the learning activities and assessment were not totally developed and implemented in exactly the same way as for the 'learner-centred curriculum' (Nunan, 1988), the fact that the students were encouraged to take part in the decision making and evaluation processes indicated that the task was not overly prescribed and was relevant to the learners' needs, interests and ability. This was a favourable condition enabling the students' involvement and autonomy to be enhanced.

The teacher

In order to be successful in teaching, it is important that teachers are aware of their roles and establish a vision of the ideal classroom. In the case of this special class, the four teachers were both "experienced and prestigious" (Teacher interview). They had been lecturing at the university for more than 15 years and had been involved in different professional development programs including further overseas training to obtain a master's degree in EFL teaching. Being well qualified and highly experienced in the field, the teachers were thus empowered and hence confident in choosing what Kramsch and Sullivan (1996) referred to as appropriate pedagogy for their class. These teachers realized that their roles not only as a 'knower', who, according to Tudor (1993, p. 24) was "a source of knowledge in terms of both the target language and the choice of methodology", and an 'activity organizer', who "sets up and steers learning activities in the right direction, motivates and encourages students, and provides authoritative feedback on students' performance" (Tudor, 1993, p. 24), but also as a 'learning counsellor', who is assumed to be responsible for preparing learners, analysing their needs, selecting methodology, transferring responsibility, and involving learners (Tudor, 1993). In order to create a classroom that was conducive to meaningful learning, the teachers built up a vision of what an ideal learner-centred classroom meant and how learner-centeredness could be promoted. They were committed to the creation of a democratic environment where the students were given the opportunity for empowerment.

We teachers have created a democratic climate so that our students feel close and comfortable in interaction ... As far as I know in all English lessons almost all teachers apply the teaching methodology they have learned overseas. In this class we apply the learner-centred approach in most of the activities, and learners' self-instruction is highly developed. (Teacher interview)

Together with the teachers' vision and an awareness of their roles, their enthusiasm in teaching also contributed to the success of the class. The teachers could not carry out the workload without enthusiasm and effort. The teachers reflected that they were eager and involved when teaching this class because of (a) the trust given to them by the university and the department, (b) the power and freedom they had in deciding the syllabus and teaching approaches and in selecting teaching materials, and (c) the inspirational rewards given to them by their students' eagerness and involvement in learning.

The teachers' constructive attitudes towards their students and their teaching and the fairness in evaluation also greatly affected their students' involvement. The teachers

were open-minded and democratic, and friendly and close to their students as well. In addition, fairness in evaluating students was observed. The teacher confirmed, that a lack of fairness might be understood as existing in certain subjects, but it was totally non-existent in the English class. (Teacher interview)

Although the students did not strongly confirm that their teachers were totally fair in assessing their progress, they admitted that they were happy with the way they were evaluated.

It is not easy to say that fairness has been respected in marking students' papers. It is rather easy in science subjects, but marking papers in language subjects is generally subjective as there are different possible answers to one question. However, in my view, assessment is most valued in the sense that students can be motivated rather than focusing on marks which are merely for the formalities of assessment. It is good if both teachers and students feel satisfied. (Student group discussion)

Finally, acting as mediators in the process of learning, the teachers gradually helped their students redefine their roles as language learners and become more involved, self-regulated and autonomous in learning. The teacher reflected on how she mediated the learning, "We help students identify the aims and requirements of the tasks they are going to do, monitor them in the process of carrying out the tasks, and give them feedback after the tasks have been assessed." (Teacher interview)

In brief, the teachers' qualifications and experiences in teaching, an awareness of their roles, from a learner-centred perspective and their vision of the ideal learner-centred classroom, their fairness, enthusiasm and constructive attitudes towards students and teaching, all contributed to the success of learner-centeredness in language teaching and learning.

The learner

Through classroom observation and interviews, various factors were identified that affected the students' involvement, notably the learners' personal characteristics and the way they responded to a learner-centred teaching approach.

Learners' Personal Qualities

(a) Showing a high degree of motivation; (b) having self-confidence; (c) demonstrating an awareness of learning needs and of the role of language learners; (d) being strategic and enthusiastic in learning; (e) being curious and creative in thinking; and (f) holding democratic, open-minded, and critical attitudes were identified by the participants as essential attributes of positive language learners.

All students in this class were highly motivated. First, the students entered this university because they were interested in English as a discipline and because they wanted to become teachers of English on graduation. They felt privileged to have been selected to study in this challenging and demanding class. They were motivated to study as a result of the friendly, supportive, cooperative and competitive environment in the classroom. They were also motivated because of a sense of competence and success. Every student in this class felt that they were successful in their study and in the use of the target language. Finally, the policy of reward and punishment was another powerful source of motivation. According to university policy, the best students might be allowed to continue to study for a master's degree or might be sent overseas for further training. One student had already been sent to the United States for this purpose. On the other hand, weaker students might be replaced by other more competent ones from the mainstream classes. Therefore, to survive in this class meant that the students had to be very competitive.

Next, self-confidence was identified as one of the conditions for the students to be involved in learning. In order for the learners to be confident they must first of all feel competent in their academic work. Being the top 20 of more than 200 students in the same course, these students were very confident of their ability to succeed academically. In addition, in order to improve their confidence the students took part in different activities in which they would be able to express their thoughts.

Researcher: How can you build up your confidence?

Student 1: Always say what you mean.

Student 2: In my first year I took part in a (an English-speaking) club. I became more confident within a month. Although I'm still going to the club, I'm not going there to speak English but to improve my confidence.

Finally, the classroom climate or environment was very favourable for the students to develop their confidence. It was an environment where English was the compulsory language and had to be spoken by every student whenever they entered the classroom, and where everybody was friendly and cooperative. One student reflected, "When studying at high school my confidence was very low. Since I entered this university my confidence has been enhanced thanks to the ebullient and constructive climate." (Student group discussion)

The students' motivation and confidence were positively affected by their awareness of learning needs and the role of a language learner. Thanks to (a) a thorough orientation at the beginning of the program, (b) the teacher mediation in the process of learning, and (c) the self assessment of strengths and weaknesses, most of the students said that they knew what to learn and what to do in order to improve. They were aware that being involved in the learning process was crucial for successful learning.

In my view, in language learning involvement must be ranked the most important. It is because of being active we can truly open our hearts. It might be a little bit exaggerated to say 'opening our heart', but I can say that we can learn new knowledge and have new experiences. Being involved means taking an initiative and an active role in seeking knowledge. We have a word, an interesting word, 'Jump in,' you won't gain anything until you jump in. (Student group discussion)

Thanks to their awareness of learning needs and of the active role of language learners, the students could be said to be strategic and enthusiastic learners. When asked if they regularly reviewed what had been done and made plans for their learning, most students gave positive answers.

Normally we have our personal plans for study. Right at the beginning of an academic year our teachers give us guidance on how to make a personal plan for ourselves, and an evaluation is carried out at the end of the year to reflect on how and what way we have improved during the year. We are given a schedule and a list of objectives and are asked to estimate what objectives we can achieve based on our real capacity. As you saw, normally in the first lesson of a course, we are encouraged to define our aims and objectives, our procedures and ways of implementing our plans. Then our teachers discuss our plans with us and we come to an agreement based on our needs. (Student group discussion)

In addition to making plans for study, self-assessment was also mentioned as one part of the students' routine.

Researcher: Have you done any self-assessment?

Students 2, 3: Yes, we have. Very regularly.

Researcher: With teachers' guidance or by yourselves?

Students 1: By ourselves. And we check the results based on answer keys.

Students 2: Sometimes our teachers help us. However, we want to measure what level of English proficiency we have reached, and want to see if we can reach a certain certificate of the English proficiency. So we do it ourselves.

The students' enthusiasm about learning was apparent in their workload and the variety of activities both in and out of the classroom. According to the students' estimate, their activities in the classroom were only about one fifth to one third of the total English language learning activities they were involved in: "In the classroom, our teachers only give us guidance. I mean we are told what to do and how to do it. Most of the work is undertaken outside the classroom by ourselves" (Student group discussion)

In addition to carrying out what was assigned by the teachers, most of the students were very eager to take part in different activities which they believed would help them improve their knowledge, language and communication skills, and confidence. Some activities included going to English speaking clubs, acting as EFL tutors and tourist guides, working at international fairs, and being volunteers in some cultural or sports events like the South East Asian Games⁴.

A curious and creative mind was also identified as one of the qualities of involved language learners. In addition to the normal tasks they had to do in every lesson or everyday, the students were very creative in that they developed different intellectual activities through which their curiosity could be satisfied and their English competence and performance could be improved. This quality was particularly praised by the teacher.

The students are highly conscious of self study. For example, they publish a bulletin without being told or required to. They publish one issue every month. They write or select articles and writings. They make it as beautiful as a magazine. (Teacher interview)

In another instance, the teacher recalled that these students developed exercises to help other students to improve themselves. On the occasion of the new school year the students organised a meeting to offer the newly enrolled students a practical orientation program. During the meeting, the new students were able to interact with the current ones to learn from their valuable experiences. By so doing the students were able to reflect on their experiences as involved language learners and were able to consolidate their confidence and communication skills.

Students' Responses to Learner-Centeredness in the Classroom

Nunan (1996) claimed that in a learner-centred approach the student plays a key role in the process of learning. This key role was manifested in the HQ class as the students were considered to be at the centre of learning. First, the students were positively viewed as involved learners by their teachers and in their own self-assessment. According to the teacher, Vietnamese learners were not passive by nature. Whether the learners were active or passive depended greatly on the learning conditions. In this class, the students were much more involved than those in the mainstream classes because of the favourable learning conditions they enjoyed. On their part, the students rated their involvement in learning at seven to eight marks out of ten. This assessment indicated that they believed themselves to be involved in learning while not being complacent

⁴ South East Asian Games

about it. With this constructive view, both teachers and students could develop their positive attitudes to teaching and learning.

Second, the students were treated as the centre of learning in that they were really empowered. The process of student empowerment included decision making, critical thinking, reflection, and the recognition of multiple viewpoints. Empowerment would not exist without a democratic environment, and this could not be achieved without action. Therefore, empowerment involved action; action involved change (Sorensen, 1996). Because of the awareness that decision making was an inevitable component in a democratic classroom, the teachers allowed and encouraged students to make their contributions to the selection of the syllabus, learning contents and learning materials. Through making decisions, learners' critical thinking and reflective skills were enhanced. The students were encouraged to reflect on and provide feedback on the previous year's program that could serve as the background for the construction of the coming year's program. In addition, as part of their assessment, the students' portfolios enabled them to reflect on the progress they made during the year. Sorensen believed that students' reflecting on their work was "a high-level thinking activity" and portfolios should be "a collection of work that shows growth" (Sorensen, 1996, p. 94). The students were also trained to recognize different viewpoints from their peers, their teachers, and from different sources they heard or read about in an open-minded but critical manner. "We are critical in selecting what we need to learn," said one of the students.

Finally, the learner's key role was also apparent in that, with their teachers' assistance, the students gradually took control of their study and became very involved in making the greatest use of available resources and favourable learning conditions to develop their self-study skills.. Examples of the students' participation in classroom interaction and their involvement in different activities after class proved that the students were fully aware of their role as language learners, and of the learning process itself.

Because the students in the HQ Class were the most important elements in the processes of teaching and learning, they could be regarded as involved learners who were aware of their roles as language learners and performed these roles in accordance with the principles of learner-centeredness.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Student-centred learning is an active and dynamic process through which learners develop a deep understanding and take responsibility for their own learning. Although it is in a developmental stage in the Vietnamese educational context, a student-centred approach has proved to be conducive to meaningful learning. The successful application of the new approach in the HQ Class was facilitated through the key aspects of the four elements in the process of teaching and learning, namely the context, the task, the teacher and the learner. First, national policies on educational renovation and the active involvement of the Vietnamese people in every aspect of life in the current situation of socio-economic development; the university's vision and commitment to improve both the teaching and learning, its policies and the will to implement changes in the way of teaching and learning, its investment in providing essential resources and equipment; and the class size, its structure, and the classroom culture together formed a favourable environment for the implementation of a student-centred approach to enhance learners' involvement in the HQ class. Second, the negotiated curriculum, learning materials, and learning activities allowed the students to participate in constructing learning contents which were more relevant to their needs, interests and ability. Moreover, the teachers who were both well qualified and experienced performed their roles in accordance with learner-centred perspectives to build up a democratic classroom in which every student was actively involved in the learning process. Finally, thanks to their positive personal qualities and to their vision and awareness of the learner roles, the HQ class students took control of their study and became involved language learners

who played key roles in the process of learning. Hopefully, this model of teaching and learning will not be confined solely to HQ students, but expanded widely to other mainstream classes at more educational levels in different fields of study.

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